

Racing Is Just a Drag for Big Willie's Crowd: Big Willie: Leader of the Street Racers

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Racing Is Just a Drag for Big Willie's Crowd

BY DAVE DISTEL

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IRVINE—One of the first things that impresses you about the man they call Big Willie is his automobile, a bright orange 1970 Dodge Daytona with an elevated spoiler.

Then the car door opens, the man steps out and the car, proportionately, seems no larger than a toy.

Mike Jones, the general manager at Orange County International Raceway, had laughed when

someone wondered how to recognize Big Willie Robinson, the organizer and president of the ostentatiously named National and International Brotherhood of Street Racers, Inc.

"Listen," Jones chuckled, "when Big Willie gets here, you'll know him when you see him."

Big Willie and the world's largest group of organized insomniacs hope to spend a night a month at International Raceway. The high speed slumber parties open after midnight and last until long after reveille at

the nearby El Toro Marine Corps Air Station.

Big Willie arrived a little early for the first session of "after-hours" drags and gathered his lieutenants around him. He outlined, as he had so many times in the past, the rules under which the drags would be conducted.

He presented a rather imposing sight, standing in the midst of the group. He wore a bowler hat and his Levi jacket was adorned with a baroque collection of badges.

"Big Willie," declared one of the embroidered badges, "President."

It need not have included the adjective "big," because anyone close enough to read it could see for himself. Willie stands 6-6 and weighs 300 pounds. His 20-inch biceps, give or take the ripple of a muscle or two, bulge with authority.

"What do you do," one of his organizers, smiled, "when a 500-pound canary chirps? You listen."

Please Turn to Page 10, Col. 1

Big Willie: Leader of the Street Racers

Continued from First Page

But this man who unites the potpourri of people known as the Street Racers just has to be made of more than muscle.

Willie's people were racing on the track below as he sat in the tower and talked about something which seems very important to him—brotherhood. The left sleeve of his jacket bears an American Flag and the words "A New Breed of Brotherhood."

And it is, indeed, a new breed of brotherhood. The Street Racers come in all shades of the human rainbow and range from opposite ends of the political spectrum.

"We have members of militant groups from both sides," explained Big Willie, "and we have lawyers and doctors and sheriffs and police."

"This is our new breed of brotherhood. Through wheels we communicate."

Louisiana Native

Willie himself is black, a "refugee" from Louisiana.

"Going to Louisiana," he said sadly, "is like going to a different world. Back there, we know we're not liked or wanted."

He only fraternized with whites, he recalled, when he was dragged against them in the streets. That is the South's idea of close "race" relations.

"When I graduated from high school," he reminisced, "I wanted to become a surgeon. LSU has one of the best medical schools in the country, so that's where I enrolled."

"I was one of the first blacks to go to LSU."

That year, 1960, he found that the color of his skin greatly restricted his activities at LSU.

"They weren't ready for integration," he said. "The students were, but not the old faculty members."

Heads West

Discouraged by discrimination, he headed west with hopes of enrolling at UCLA. He could not find work which would leave him free for classes. Disappointed once again, he joined the Army.

"My dreams of becoming a surgeon went down the drain," he sighed.

There was no bitterness in his voice as he talked of his boyhood in Louisiana. And there was no bitterness as he told of being turned away at a restaurant in Texas.

As Willie talked, his outlook on life was becoming as impressive as his physical stature.

"Fighting hate with hate don't work," he admonished. "I want to work at promoting brotherhood."

Hate manifested itself in the summer of 1965 in Watts, but Los Angeles has remained relatively cool since then.

Keep Cool

"We've helped keep L.A. cool," Big Willie claimed. "When the tension is high, The Man calls me and says, 'OK, Willie, it's all clear.'

"We run our biggest meets when the tension is high. When Dr. King was killed, we swung into action."

When Willie talks about "The Man," he is making reference to the police department. The Man regards the Street Racers with a somewhat laissez faire attitude.

"They can dig our goals," Willie explained. "We coo-



MR. BIG That's Big Willie Robinson, organizer and president of National and International Brotherhood of Street Racers, a group which hopes to spend one night a month racing until dawn at Orange County International Raceway. Times photo by Vince Streano

perate with them and they cooperate with us."

Street racing per se is illegal. There is nothing underground about the Street Racers as an organization, however.

Races are set up at open meetings in vacant lots or parking lots. A location is established, the street is blockaded and the races are run.

No Trouble

"We race near factories and oil fields," Willie explained, "where we have less chance of disturbing people."

The police generally know where we are, but they don't show up unless they get complaints. When they do show up, they just tell us to break it up and we split."

No one in the Los Angeles Police Department can formally sanction an organization engaged in an illegal activity, but Billy Mills, a city councilman, expresses a high regard for Willie Robinson in particular and the Street Racers in general.

"They have an extremely positive approach," Mills said. "I must commend Willie for it because he has provided the leadership. He has organized the Street Racers under an extremely authoritarian command."

"He has been so effective that I quite frankly

thought for awhile that he was a police officer."

Police are inclined to turn their backs on the Street Racers because they are aware that the organization's rules are almost as elaborate as the embroidery on the Levi jackets.

"We have four major rules," Willie explained, "No fighting, no stealing, no narcotics and no booze. If everyone obeys these rules, we have no problems."

Willie himself repeats the rules before each event. It is, as his organizer remarked, like the chirp of the 500-pound canary. Everyone listens and everyone is inclined to obey.

Policing is handled by a 400-man security force. It is so effective that it has been hired by rock festivals, dances and even politicians to handle crowds.

Paul Newman, in fact, called upon the Street Racers when he was shooting "Hall of Mirrors."

It seems that one of the scenes in the movie called for a white power rally at the Sports Arena. The word spread in nearby Watts that such a rally was scheduled for the Sports Arena and there were those who became a little upset.

Newman called Billy Mills and Billy Mills called Big Willie to explain the

over, but we really enjoyed it."

One hundred Street Racers, 50 black and 50 white, were included.

The security force is only a part of the Street Racers' organizational structure. It is the attention to the multitude of details and potential dangers which gives the Street Racers their surprisingly amiable relationship with The Man.

Willie listed some of the others:

—Spectator control . . . The curbside crowds average between 1,000 and 2,000 and have soared to an unbelievable 10,000.

"When The Man says there won't be a buzz," Willie explained, "people turn out like they would at a drag strip."

—Traffic control . . . Getting a lot of people into and out of a given area can present obvious problems.

—Fire crew . . . There are three chiefs, each with a crew, and they locate at the start, finish and shutdown area.

—Medical squad . . . Three doctors and one dentist are members. Other medics are trained in first aid.

—Tech crew . . . Cars are inspected and must conform to rigid requirements.

—Race control committee . . . This group handles the actual running of the events.

There are other titles listed on the embroidered badges, such as public relations organizer and interior affairs (?) organizer.

Willie's organizers

buzzed around him and he thumbed through an attache case filled with information on the Street Racers.

Now the sky was getting light and the concession stands, as a concession to the hour, brought out the egg sandwiches.

It was a strangely eerie time of day, so late to so many at International Raceway and yet so early to the curious who drove by on the freeway.

You wondered as you climbed into bed at 7:30 a.m. if Big Willie's organization includes a wakeup organizer.

"Naturally, the people who own these high-powered cars would like to race them—somewhere."

"That's right," Big Willie nodded. "Street racing is different now than it was when you had to build your own jalopy in the back yard. Everyone can put a couple of hundred down and have what amounts to a race car."

Need Sites

But, alas, Willie maintains, there are just not enough places to legally race. International Raceway is the first strip which has obliged to stay open all night to accommodate the owl-like hours of those who race in the street.

Willie's attache case included drawings for a proposed Los Angeles Raceway Park. The plans are thoroughly entangled in red tape, however, so the Street Racers remain in the streets — except for their trips to Orange County.

Occasionally, the conversation was interrupted when Willie excused himself to make a run down the strip in his Daytona. He could not get anyone to